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# When is Navy Medicine's Birthday? Or Birthdays?

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By **André B. Sobocinski**, *historian with the U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery and editor of The Grog, A Journal of Navy Medical Heritage and Culture.*



Staff of Hospital Corps Quarterly celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Hospital Corps with a cake in 1948

Anyone who has served in the U.S. Navy can tell you that heritage and tradition are of utmost importance to this service—especially when it offers the opportunity to serve a ceremonial dessert. Navy and Navy Medicine are full of important days of remembrance, but these commemorative dates tell only part of the story. Before we indulge in the next piece of Navy birthday cake, let us look back and set the story straight on a few anniversaries.

## How old is the U.S. Navy and Navy Medical Department?

The U.S. Navy celebrates its 237th anniversary on Oct. 13, 2012. In actuality, this date marks the beginning of the Continental Navy which was disestablished at the end of the Revolutionary War in 1783. Some have argued the Navy's actual birthday is March 27, 1794, (the date of the Naval Act authorizing the construction of the first Navy ships). Officially, the U.S. Navy did not exist as a separate department from the U.S. Army (then known as the War Department) until April 30, 1798. Since Navy medical personnel (then comprised of only Surgeons and Surgeon's Mates) have been serving since the very beginning of the U.S. Navy, April could arguably be considered Navy Medicine's birthday month and that we are only 214 years young.

## Was there Dental Care in the Navy before a Navy Dental Corps?

Dental care, albeit in a very crude form, has been part of the Navy almost from the very beginning. Originally dentistry was a collateral duty of Navy surgeons and later hospital stewards with some knowledge of "dental care" (usually nothing more than tooth extraction). In fact, we do know that Navy Surgeon's Mate Henry Willis Bassett (later a victim of a duel on a beach in Rio de Janeiro in 1830), operated a "Dental Surgery" practice in Baltimore and briefly in Norfolk in the 1820s. In an advertisement appearing in the Norfolk's *American*

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*Beacon*, we see that Dr. Bassett’s services included teeth cleaning and setting Artificial Teeth “in the most approved manner” and “Cleanse, File and Plum Carious Teeth, to prevent their further decay.”

University-trained contract dentists began appearing at Navy shore stations as far back as the 1850s. One of these “first” dentists, Dr. Thomas Oliver Walton, was later appointed an “Acting Assistant Surgeon” at the Naval Academy on April 23, 1873.

The Navy Dental Corps was finally established by law on Aug. 22, 1912. Even so, the first Dental Corps appointment did not take place until two months afterwards and the first dental examinations for active duty dentists did not take place until Dec., 9 1912.

**When should the Navy Medical Corps celebrate its birthday?**

The Naval Appropriations Act of March 3, 1871 formally “established” a corps of Medical Officers. Even though the Navy Medical Corps has celebrated this day as its anniversary, this date does not account for the hundreds of Navy physicians who served from 1798 to March 2, 1871. The first Navy physicians actually received commissions on March 9, 1798, over a month before the U.S. Navy was formally established as a separate department.

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